

The Telegraph

Councillors for hire who give firms planning advice

Telegraph investigation: Councillors across England are offering themselves for hire to property developers who are hoping to take advantage of relaxed planning laws which come into effect within weeks.



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Councillors across the country are offering themselves for hire to property developers who are hoping to take advantage of relaxed planning laws which come into effect within weeks, a Daily Telegraph investigation reveals on Monday.

Local government politicians are trading on their inside knowledge of the planning system to receive fees of up to £20,000 for advice on how to get developments approved, it can be disclosed.

Despite apparently creating the potential for a conflict of interest, it is not illegal for councillors to work as paid consultants. Councils are expected to face an increase in applications for building when new planning laws take effect at the end of this month.

Under the changes, local authorities without a plan for development in their area will be expected to approve any application which can be said to be a “sustainable development”, a term that has alarmed conservationists because it is open to wide interpretation.

Councillors who can help property developers take advantage of the new laws are expecting greater demand for services as almost half of all councils have failed to agree their local plans.

One lobbying company is boasting to potential clients that it employs councillors who sit on local authority committees. An undercover investigation by this newspaper also found that councillors who have set up their own consultancy services are offering to help push through planning applications.

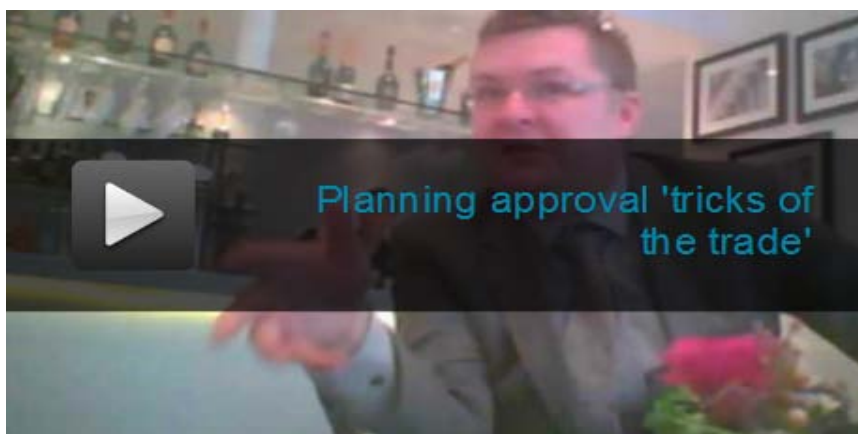
One Tory councillor in East Devon, Graham Brown, boasted: “If I can’t get planning, nobody will.”

The councillor claimed he preferred to keep a low profile, but had “access to all the right people for the right clients”. He added: “[I] don’t come cheap. I mean, there are jobs that I do for £1,000, and there are jobs that I do for £20,000 ... if I turn a greenfield into a housing estate and I’m earning the developer two or three million, then I ain’t doing it for peanuts.”

The Daily Telegraph’s investigation also looked at the activities of Indigo Public Affairs, a lobbying company, with offices in London, Newcastle and Manchester.

Its brochure for clients lists the current and former councillors it employs and sets out how the company “helps our clients achieve planning committee approval”. The firm claims it works with major firms and developers including Tesco, Barratt Homes and Taylor Wimpey.

In Newcastle, Greg Stone, a Liberal Democrat councillor who works for the firm, boasted that the company had “a good chance that via our network someone will know someone who knows somebody” at every council.



“Tricks of the trade” used to gain approval for developments included making sure planning committees included “friendly faces”, he said.

A third councillor, who sits on Elmbridge borough planning committee in Surrey, and has worked for a series of celebrity clients, disclosed how he was able effectively to circumvent the rules.

David Archer said that although he had to follow rules on planning, there were ways around the formalities. "I can't [call it in to the planning committee] if I've got an interest, but there's more than one way to skin a cat," he said.

All the councillors said their activities had been appropriately declared.

Richard Patient, the managing director of Indigo Public Affairs, said: "In common with most businesses, it is not company policy to make our staff list available to the public. However, all the councillors that we employ have declared their employment here to their respective local authority, and it is the council's responsibility to mark this on the public record in their council's register of interest."

He added that Indigo's code of conduct met or exceeded all legislative and regulatory requirements and "prohibits all members of staff who are serving councillors from working on any planning applications in their own local authority area".

Mr Brown said that he did not think his work as a consultant created a conflict of interest. He said that he spoke to other councillors and officials "as a planning consultant and not as a district councillor", which was a "widely accepted" practice within the planning industry.

Mr Archer said he believed his consultancy business was "entirely appropriate". He added: "At all times I make the proper declaration of interest if any of the applications relate to my consultancy work and any suggestion otherwise is incorrect and unlawful."

Mr Archer had said he could persuade councillors to back developments with "trade-offs", but insisted that this "loose term" meant only that planners may approve a scheme if details such as the roof line or the siting of a garage were changed.



Last week Sir Simon Jenkins, the chairman of the National Trust, warned of the risk of "warfare" in the countryside as people were constantly fighting housing and wind farm developments on their doorsteps.

The Daily Telegraph launched an undercover investigation after questions were raised by campaigners and political sources about planning applications and the use of specific consultancies that employed politicians as well as officials. Reporters posed as representatives for a major international investor who wanted to build commercial and residential property.

Guidelines from the Departments for Communities and Local Government state that councillors must not participate in discussions or votes when they have financial interests in a decision, although they may occasionally request a dispensation from the rules.

Changes to the planning system are due to come through within weeks.

Developers are expecting a boom in development as restrictions are relaxed on thousands of acres of countryside and the right of local residents to object to schemes is watered down.

The Daily Telegraph previously ran the Hands Off Our Land campaign after concerns about the impact of changes to the planning rules.

Councils were given a year to develop and adopt new local plans allow communities to set out clearly where building can take place.

However, new figures show that 52 per cent of councils in England have still not yet adopted such plans and will have to use the new National Planning Policy Framework, which campaigners say.

A spokesman for the Department for Communities and Local Government said: "The guidelines make clear that any councillor should not participate in discussions or votes where they have a financial interest.

"In addition, seven out of ten local councils now have published local plans, so it is not the case that communities will be at risk of unsustainable, speculative development after March. Up to date Local Plans provide much greater certainty to both residents and local firms, and strong protections remain in place for the green belt, countryside and areas of outstanding natural beauty."

Source: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9921344/Councillors-for-hire-who-give-firms-planning-advice.html#mm_hash